

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Francesco Ciabattoni. *Dante's Journey to Polyphony*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Pp. 250.**

*Dante's Journey to Polyphony* is divided into five chapters, which shed light on the musical background of Dante's time and diligently trace all possible sources that might have influenced Dante and his musical knowledge in the making of the *Commedia*. In chapter one, Ciabattoni examines key documents which form a reliable philological grounding in support of a rather widespread use of polyphony, both in the specificity of written and improvised polyphony, before and during Dante's time. The treatment of music in the first chapter dwells primarily on *musica instrumentalis*, the actual art of music. In chapter two, the author engages with the music of the *Commedia* and begins by proposing a view that (though being dealt with by other scholars, perhaps by some only en-passant) can be considered original and structurally sound insofar as the narratological aspect of the *Commedia* is concerned. He argues that the *Inferno* indeed contains musicality but a musicality that is essentially a "systematic reversal of sacred music." (44) It is a sort of musical parody of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, especially if one thinks of the *musica diaboli* and the singular obscene gesture of Barbariccia, a laconic and debasing gesture utterly opposite to *musica instrumentalis*, and more so to heavenly music (*musica mundana*). Chapter three is dedicated to *Purgatorio*. Here music is monophonic and attempts essentially to rid itself from the *musica diaboli* which, in turn, serves the purgatorial souls to purge themselves from sins. It is therapeutic, a kind of medicine (*pharmakon*) capable of healing the soul in order to allow the latter to reach the desirable, paradisiacal end. The *Purgatorio* is an incredibly problematic *cantica* where an unprecedented musical juncture is staged and dialectically played according to three major categories: "deceptive songs" whose examples are Casella's song and the dream song of the *femmina balba*; "healing songs, or music as *pharmakon*" represented by Psalms; "songs of angels" which the beatitudes sing in the Earthly Paradise and mark also the limit between monophony and polyphony in the *cantica*. Yet, the prominent interpretive tension occurs between deceptive and healing songs, between Casella's song ("*Amore che ne la mente mi ragiona*") and Psalm 113 ("*In*

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*exitu Israël de Aegypto*). Ciabattoni rightly argues that Casella's song is "intrinsically deceptive" though "apparently innocent", and his view, which in part holds Freccero's view, suggests that "Dante uses the musical theory he expounded in the *Convivio* to disavow the *Convivio*'s epistemological theory." (102) On this point, I do not agree with the author, particularly for his use of the verb "to disavow". Freccero is more cautious in saying that "the episode constitutes a partial correction of an important thesis of the *Convivio*" (*Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, 187). In my opinion, Dante does not 'disavow' but rather improves his epistemological theory expounded in the *Convivio*, for he uses "*Amore che ne la mente mi ragiona*" and the term *canzone* in the sense of the highest and most perfect compositional form of poetry. Poetry, for Dante, is the only medium that allows him to continue providing "that matter of which [he is] made the scribe" ("*quella materia ond' [egli è] fatto scriba*", *Par.* X.27). The poet's choice regarding Casella's episode is epistemic; it is a momentary but significant look backward, which mediates between the poetic language and its epistemological faculties. It is an instance of poetic reflection begun theoretically in the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia*. In *Purgatorio* II the episode reiterates such a reflection as to the role it played on the *modi significandi*, but it also represents the actual crafting of an unparalleled poetry serving the poet as the only effective means to bring his journey to a felicitous end. Thus, Dante's profane song must be viewed not as an instance of the *object* of signification (*rem tene*), but rather as an example limited to the *form* of signification (*verba tene*) that does not necessarily contradict the religious sense, the one toward which Dante is supposed to steer his poetry. Consequently, Cato's rebuke serves as an admonition to recognize such a point. The interesting question related to the mode of signification using Cato's rebuke is: Does Cato really understand Dante's poetic intention? My view is that he does not for the very ambiguity set forth by the double purpose embedded in Dante's master poetic plan: the sense of the poetic *form* and the sense of the poetic *object*. This is also the source that keeps the hermeneutic debate open regarding Casella's episode. In chapter four Ciabattoni analyzes the music of *Paradiso*. He calls it polyphonic and aims at reconciling the "multiplicity of human nature in the unity of God" (155). It plays an allegorical function that

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points toward a balanced model insofar as the roles of the State and that of the Church are concerned. It further provides all the classical and medieval knowledge on the world harmony, the influence of numbers on music, numerological symbolism, musical instruments allegorically employed, and the cathartic function of music played in the *Commedia*. Finally, in chapter five, the author deals specifically with the music of the spheres (*musica mundana*), and states that it is not certain that Dante “firmly believed” in the music of the spheres and that “there is no textual evidence that he did”(194). Here, too, I do not agree with the position of the author because the *Paradiso* is an authentic expression of the *musica mundana*, which concludes the entire musical/structural plan of the *Commedia*. Evidence of Dante’s adherence to the Pythagorean/Platonic music of the spheres—rejected by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas but certainly a common knowledge in the Middle Ages through the *Somnium Scipionis* of Cicero, Boethius’ *De institutione musica*, and other textual confirmations of the Church Fathers—is supported by numerous lines found in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, for which I encourage the reader to refer back (surprisingly) to the last chapter of Ciabattoni’s *Dante’s Journey to Polyphony* and to my *Ordine e struttura musicale nella Divina commedia*, (Fucecchio, Firenze: 2000, ch. 5). Indeed the *Paradiso* does not contain, literally, “a clear statement that entitles us to claim that Dante accepted the harmony of the spheres as a philosophical theory.” (207) Nonetheless, the author is neglecting that Dante’s use of the language is poetical, and does not need a literal endorsement to confirm his acceptance of the harmony of the spheres. Further on in chapter five, Ciabattoni arrives at the much hoped and persuasive conclusion by saying that Dante did not want to “state [it] explicitly” (208). Yet, why is he looking for a clear literal statement when even in his conclusive remarks he argues: “Dante’s interest in the speculative side of musical thought yields to poetic invention”? (216). Ciabattoni’s answer is that Dante refuses to take “an overt stance” (216). Dante’s aim is not that of refusing to take “an overt stance”. He simply talks about the music of the spheres in a poetic form. It seems that the author in this chapter is clutching at straws by saying so much that in the end says very little, in addition to what has not yet been said by others in regards to the music of the spheres.

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Overall, Ciabattoni's work is well researched and is certainly an important study, which contributes positively to the musical aspect of Dante criticism. In *Dante's Journey to Polyphony*, in addition to its valuable content, I would have liked to find a more philosophical debate concerning the music of the *Commedia*, since the music of the *Commedia* is ruled by a philosophical imprint and becomes a generative component of a true transcendental mode of signification.

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